

Elbert D. Thomas in the Context of U.S.-Japanese Relations

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My assignment for the session this morning is to make a brief comment on Professor Iguchi Haruo's paper under the title of "Elbert D. Thomas: Forgotten Internationalist Missionary, Scholar, New Deal Senator, Japanophile, and Visionary." In the article, Professor Iguchi insists that "Thomas's thoughts and activities deserve a historical analysis in order to better understand American thinking and actions about U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region."

Let me explain about Elbert D. Thomas's career according to this article. Thomas came to Japan with his wife in 1907 as a Mormon missionary, and gave sermons in Japanese. His sermons were collected and published in book form, which was used as a text in Sunday schools for many years. While staying in Japan until 1912, Thomas and his wife became fond of the Japanese and their culture, and even named their first daughter "Chiyo," which was a Japanese girl's name. After Thomas went back to the United States and earned his Ph. D. for his dissertation on ancient Chinese political thought, he began to teach in the department of history and political science at the University of Utah in the 1920s. But, in 1932, Thomas was elected as a senator from Utah, and got involved in U.S. policies toward Japan in the 1930s and 1940s when the relationship between the two countries was critical.

After the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, Thomas began monthly radio broadcasts to Japan, sponsored by the Office of War Information (OWI). Besides, he published the book entitled *The Four Fears* in 1944 with a view of expressing his viewpoints regarding the world order after World War II and America's mission in the international affairs. He also discussed in the book the issue of retention of the emperor in the formation of the U.S. policy toward Japan. The senator showed strong interest in Japan's future position in Asia as well. In the meantime, Thomas established an intimate relationship with Mike Masaoka and supported the activities of the Japanese-American Citizens League (JACL) during and after the war. An analysis of his thoughts and activities during this period consists of the main body of the article.

In following Thomas's career in the former half part of the twentieth century, Professor Iguchi has made extensive research into Thomas papers stored at the University of Utah and his articles published in the various magazines in addition

to other primary sources available only in the United States.

I would like to raise some questions about Thomas's thoughts and activities on the individual topics which are discussed in this paper. But, I have to admit that I will focus on some of them. Until the late 1930s Senator Thomas favored appeasing Japanese militarism, including that practiced in the aggression against China. For example, when Japanese airplanes sank the *Panay* on the Yangtze River in 1937, "he appealed to the American public and Congress for calm" accepting the Japanese government's apology and payment of reparations. But, he changed his position and supported the American Committee for Non-Participation in Japanese Aggression. After referring to Thomas's change of position toward Japan, Professor Iguchi added that he "hoped that the U.S. could guide Japan towards peaceful behavior through American tutelage on issues concerning morality, diplomacy and peace."² My first question is what historical evidence exists for this statement about Thomas's wish. There seems to be no footnote regarding this comment. What disturbs me in the statement is the phrase "U.S. could guide Japan towards peaceful behavior through American tutelage." Did Thomas believe in the effect of "American tutelage" on Japan's behavior? If so, did his belief have something to do with his experience as a missionary in Japan? Or did Thomas simply hope for Japan's change of aggressive military policy toward China, for example, by pressure through the activities of the aforementioned committee which he supported?

Making extensive use of Thomas papers, Professor Iguchi explores the unknown contents of his broadcasts during the Second World War, which is quite exciting for me. Thomas warned Japanese listeners after the atomic bomb on Hiroshima that some other cities could suffer from nuclear destruction without an immediate Japanese surrender, advising them to stay away from these cities. Interestingly enough, Professor Iguchi also makes it clear that Thomas was convinced that Hirohito had listened to his broadcasting during the war. It is not easy, however, to decide how the fact the emperor had listened to his message had an impact on his final decision to stop the war. In addition to these warnings to the radio audience, Thomas also talked about ideas as to how the war would be ended and postwar reforms carried out. My second question is related to this. In the hope of ending the war, Thomas urged the Japanese "to return to constitutional government, to reject their war lords, and to follow the ideals laid down for them 60 years ago by Emperor Meiji when he issued his famous rescript on government."³ According to this statement, did Thomas consider that returning to the political, economic, and social system on the basis of the Meiji Constitution would make Japan a peaceful nation? If so, is this idea related to his experience in Japan? How did he evaluate the Meiji Constitution?

In *The Four Fears* published in 1944 Thomas argued that Americans should overcome the defeat of Wilson's idealism after World War I. The senator maintained that the United States should take a leadership position in creating a stable world order after World War II in cooperation with Great Britain and the

Soviet Union. The book also called for economic interdependence and mutual economic prosperity in the hope of decreasing the possibility of a major world war. Professor Iguchi regards the argument presented in the book as the same as Henry Luce's "American Century," which is well-known for the advocacy of American mission after the war.

At the same time, Thomas dealt with the issue of his reform plan in the postwar period in connection with the emperor system. Before analyzing his thoughts on the issue, let me take a look at the recent interpretation on the subject in Walter LaFeber's book entitled *The Clash*. Historian Walter LaFeber interpreted the ideas of the postwar reform in Japan advocated by leaders of the Japan hands such as Joseph Grew and Hugh Borton as follows; they emphasized that the emperor could be a force for postwar "stability and reform" in the chaotic society under occupation; they agreed the emperor would be placed outside of political authority, and that Japan must be demilitarized; and that the United States would take charge of the reforms in a united Japan.⁴

Thomas argued in the book "for using the Imperial throne in carrying out reforms in Japan after the Japanese surrender," because he wanted the United States "to make Japan conform to an American-led world order." Although the emperor was a puppet of the militarists, according to Thomas, he was regarded as "more of a high priest than a ruler" by the Japanese.⁵ On the basis of the people's understanding of the emperor, Thomas found it convenient and necessary for the United States to make best use of the emperor in forcing the unconditional surrender to the Japanese.

Principally, it seems to me there is no big difference between the Japan hands' policies and those stated by Senator Thomas concerning the subject. Actually, Thomas supported Grew in his argument in favor of the retention of the emperor. But here, I would like to raise the third question about Thomas's reform ideas. In the broadcasts during the war, as quoted above, Thomas essentially urged the Japanese to follow the ideals laid down by Emperor Meiji. On the other hand, in his book published in 1944, he hoped that the United States would make Japan conform to an American-led world order. Comparing with these opinions, I have the impression that Thomas's reform principle had changed from returning to the Meiji constitutional system to the adoption of a new economic and political system which would coincide with the American-led world order. I wonder why this transformation took place in the short period of time. Did the transformation have something to do with the debate which had been carried out among the Japan hands in the American government?

This question raises another question about Thomas's role in the process of forming the reform policies toward Japan. Professor Iguchi states that "[i]n order to achieve what Thomas perceived as the idealism explored during the Meiji period, Thomas prescribed economic and political and constitutional reforms in postwar Japan in addition to removing Japan's colonial and conquered possessions."⁶ How did the Japan hands evaluate Thomas's idealism in

transforming Japan under the American occupation? Where is “what Thomas perceived as the idealism explored during the Meiji period” to be placed in the reform plans in the postwar Japan under the new constitution?

As to the main factors in inducing Japanese surrender, Senator Thomas referred to “the decision by the Emperor and the willingness of the Japanese people to embrace surrender based on their trust of Americans.”⁷ At the same time, however, he ignored the facts that atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Russians entered the Asia-Pacific war in its final stage. As is well-known to the historians, there were several elements which brought the Japanese government into the final decision, but I am not familiar with the reason that Thomas was willing to insist on, that is “the willingness of the Japanese people to embrace surrender based on their trust of Americans.” I am curious to know why Thomas regarded Japanese trust of Americans as one of the major reasons for surrender.

Professor Iguchi makes it clear that Senator Thomas got involved in dealing with the Japanese-Americans through Mike Masaoka and JACL and analyzed such cases as the followings. Thomas assisted “Japanese-Americans through his protégé Mike Masaoka,” leader of the JACL during and after the war. Senator Thomas entered into the *Congressional Record* an essay written by Masaoka under the title of “The Japanese-American Creed” that pledged their loyalty to the United States. After the Japanese-Americans were detained in the camps, the American government attempted to utilize them in the military fronts. In the process of achieving this project, Senator Thomas “played a behind-the-scenes role in assisting the efforts of Masaoka and JACL in their efforts to organize the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and move Japanese Americans out from the relocation camps.” Professor Iguchi also reveals Thomas’s efforts to protect the Japanese community from the ill-treatment during the war. The senator “appealed to the American public not to mistreat Japanese and Japanese-Americans interned or living in the U.S. at a time when emotions ran high as Americans learned of brutal treatment and atrocities by Japanese soldiers towards American civilians and soldiers in Japanese captivity.” Since the last case is not known to us, Professor Iguchi’s effort to dig out obscure cases in which Thomas was involved should be highly appreciated.

It goes out without saying that Professor Iguchi is familiar with the recent development of the study of Japanese-Americans both in the United States and in Japan. One recent trend is to reevaluate the activities of Masaoka and JACL during the war in the Japanese community. One historian disclosed that some of the JACL leaders warned the members not to support Yasui Minoru, Nisei lawyer who tried to bring the curfew to court by breaking the order deliberately. Masaoka was critical of his action because the trial would violate the creed that the Japanese-Americans pledged to the American government.⁸ Another historian discovered that although they were loyal to the country, about three hundred niseis refused to be drafted on the basis of civil disobedience, which has been

concealed until recently even among the Japanese-American community. The second generation wished that all of them had been loyal to the United States during the war.⁹ Under the present situation, it is not easy for historians to judge which side was right or wrong, but what we must do is to pay more attention to cases and incidents that remained under the surface.

Thomas expressed his belief right after the war that the United States had “a mission to expand the ideas of the American Revolution” by spreading the order it had created in the country “based on the American Constitution to the world.” As for U.S. policies toward Japan, the senator indicated his optimism that “Japan, under American tutelage and influence, could be transformed into a truly democratic country.” Again Thomas expressed his confidence in 1948 that under American tutelage, Japan will exert leadership in Asia and under the new constitution democracy was taking root in Japan.”¹⁰ Why was he so optimistic about “American tutelage and influence” in Japanese society? Professor Iguchi states at the beginning of the article that “Thomas’s observations of Japan and East Asia were deeply rooted in his experience in Japan as a Mormon missionary. His perception of Japan and the Japanese reflected humanitarianism and missionary internationalism that overlapped with Wilsonian internationalism.”¹¹ I would appreciate it if the professor could explain to us not only the reasons for his optimism but also the meaning of “humanitarianism and missionary internationalism that overlapped with Wilsonian internationalism.”

In the final analysis, although Professor Iguchi has argued many interesting issues concerning Thomas’s thoughts and activities in the context of the U.S.-Japanese relations, I have only focused on the issues that attracted my attention. But let me add that I have enjoyed the paper very much because it gives us a lot of interesting knowledge about Senator Thomas and his words and deeds that I was not familiar with. Professor Iguchi is right in saying that Elbert D. Thomas has been “forgotten.”

Notes

1. Iguchi Haruo, “Elbert D. Thomas: Forgotten Internationalist Missionary, Scholar, New Deal Senator, Japanophile, and Visionary,” Presentation draft for NASSS 2007* 2.
2. Ibid., 7.
3. Ibid., 8.
4. Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations throughout History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 237–238.
5. Iguchi, “Elbert D. Thomas,” 12, 14.
6. Ibid., 15–16.
7. Ibid., 26.
8. Uesugi Shinobu, *Nijitaisenka no “Amerika Minshushugi”* (“American Democracy” during the Second World War) (Kodansha, 2000)
9. Eric L. Muller, *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft*

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Resisters in World War II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001)

10. Iguchi, "Elbert D. Thomas," 29, 32, 37.

11. Ibid., 1.

* PDF is available at NASSS Executive Office